

Power and Resistance in the Classroom:  
*Teachers' and Pupils' Narratives on Disaffection*

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## **Abstract**

This study sought to analyse critically the discourse of pupils' disaffection captured in the views of a teacher, a Learning Mentor and a group of six pupils from key stage 4 at a secondary school in south London. The analysis examined how some pupils acquired the label 'disaffected' and considered the extent to which dominant curriculum ideologies and power relations between teachers and pupils contributed to pupils' disconnection from learning. Additionally, the study examined the effectiveness of the Alternative Education project organised by the school in a bid to engage disaffected pupils in learning.

The corpus of data was generated through a combination of semi-structured one to one interviews and a focus group interview. Drawing on Fairclough's (1989, 2001, 2003) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), excerpts from the data were chosen on the basis of their salience to the key themes of the study to describe, interpret and explain the opaque and contradictory discourse of disaffection.

The teachers' narratives largely located explanations for pupils' disconnection from learning in pupils' cognitive, emotional and behavioural pathologies or the influence of a moral underclass culture in their communities. The pupils' counter-narratives suggested that their disengagement was a rational response to a perception of demotivating curricula and disrespectful teachers, resulting in a counter school culture, where resistance accorded status among peers and compliance with teachers' demands for conformity earned the derisory label 'Neek'.

The teacher's narrative also revealed that curriculum overload and the preoccupation with attainment targets posed significant challenges in his attempts to engage disaffected learners. However, the success of the Alternative Education Programme highlighted the importance of flexibility and positive educator-pupil relationships in capturing and sustaining the interest of learners.

It is argued that an adequate analysis of the determinants of disaffection ought to consider the impact of instrumentality in education on relationships in the situational, institutional and societal contexts of schooling. Furthermore, the significance of class, ethnicity and gender on the academic under-achievement of black working class boys, can not be overstated.

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